Exploring Racial and Social Identity through Space in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

by

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In *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* (1852), Harriet Beecher Stowe uses space as a powerful tool to illustrate how identity is imposed, resisted, and redefined in a society marked by racial injustice. The shifting spaces provide more than just setting the scene; they give us information about the characters, their inner thoughts and feelings, the conditions in which these were developed and how these affect their final actions. In dehumanizing systems, enslaved people strive to preserve humanity while facing innumerable difficulties. As readers, we move through emotional, symbolic, and strategic spaces, which help us to comprehend the reality of slavery in the nineteenth-century United States and the struggle to keep one's identity intact, in an environment where one is not treated as a human being with free will but rather as a commodity.

The emotional relation that links characters to certain places within space on the basis of memories and lived experience, where spatial objects inspire special feelings and create emotional attachment to the landscape is called emotional space (Ryan et al. 39, 106). This space can be applied in Stowe's novel to depict the ways in which the characters are attached to the landscape. In particular, the novel illustrates how slavery disrupts domestic and familiar life, especially for enslaved women. The home, which is associated with emotions of safety, love, stability, and a part of an individual's identity, now generates feelings of anxiety, fear, and loss because of "the parting from every familiar object" (Stowe 805). Stowe acknowledges the existence of two distinct "spheres," the masculine world and the feminine, domestic realm, and accepts the traditional traits typically assigned to women. To her, true femininity involves a deep commitment to Christian values like faith, hope, charity, mercy, and self-sacrifice, while maintaining moral and physical purity, being guided more by emotion than logic, obeying worldly authority, and treating the home as sacred (Ammons 164). All these traits are portrayed in Eliza, who is a caring mother with unconditional love for her son. This maternal love is what allows her to do anything she can in order to save her child from being sold, transcending all societal roles and expectations. Although Eliza did not want to leave—"whither could she go from a home like that?" (Stowe 805)—her forced departure becomes a symbol for the loss of both her social and emotional identity, emphasizing how slavery taints not only the bodies but

also the psyches and emotional bonds. Her journey towards freedom redefines her as a hero and a moral person who has to be defiant and strong so as to stop being the victim. Stowe sees these feminine qualities not just as desirable, but as the highest form of humanity, because they prioritize the well-being of others over individual gain.

While domestic space reveals the slave's emotional destruction in slavery, Stowe also makes use of natural and geographical spaces to showcase the gap between slavery and freedom. Eliza's journey towards the river functions as a symbol of transformation and spiritual independence. Stowe creates a geographical image through language in order to contrast oppression with hope. The river serves as a barrier between slavery and freedom which needs to be surpassed with the contribution of a supernatural power that is beyond human effort. The scene is infused with supernatural intensity, describing Eliza as "nerved with strength such as God gives only to the desperate" (813). Her "flying leap" (813) over the floating ice exceeds human physical ability, making it seem like a miracle is taking place. Through this depiction, Stowe suggests that Eliza's courage is sanctified, and is full of divine protection. Alexis de Tocqueville writes "There is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America" highlighting the importance of religion (qtd. in Campbell and Kean 139). From the very beginning, the nation's purpose and identity have been closely tied to religious beliefs (139). Despite the restrictions enslaved people faced, they developed their own religious beliefs: they believed in Christianity. This religious belief was extremely important as it helped them through the hardships of slavery and gave them a purpose (160). The symbolic weight of the river rises with Stowe's biblical allusion" "Her first glance was at the river, which lay, like Jordan, between her and the Canaan of liberty on the other side" (Stowe 807). This refers to the Israelites' crossing into the Promised Land, underlining the notion that escaping slavery is more than just a physical act, but a sacred journey. In our case, Canada was represented as a promised land, the final destination for freedom and slavery redemption. The river is also described as "sullen" and "surging" highlighting the unknown and the dangers it might conceal (808). Through this symbolism, Stowe encourages readers to acknowledge that the struggle for freedom is both morally justified and extremely dangerous, depicting the path of an enslaved person in a manner relatable to her Christian audience.

In addition to its spiritual meaning, geography becomes an important component to demonstrate that agency and resistance are possible to arise in the face of oppression. Stowe

transforms the Southern landscape into more than a site of enslavement. It evolves into a zone where geographic awareness acts as a defensive tool. The intentional arrangement of space is especially clear in scenes involving escapes and chases, like the moment when Haley tries to recapture Eliza. Sam and Andy deceive Haley by using his narrow grasp of the geography against him. Haley assertively states, "I know the way of all of 'em,--they makes tracks for the underground" (Stowe 811), convinced that their routes adhere to certain patterns. Sam, seemingly in agreement, influences Haley's choices by tapping into his overconfidence. Selecting between the "dirt road" and the "pike" (811) is significant, which emphasizes how geography can be manipulated by the oppressed to undermine the systems of slavery. This moment is significant for its dramatic illustration that the enslaved characters lack physical freedom, yet their intimate knowledge of the land gives them a form of advantage. Though the landscape has been commoditized by plantation owners, the Southern landscape retains secrets and potentials that cannot be completely controlled. Forests, back roads, rivers, and fields blanketed in snow are more than mere scenery or barriers, but they represent possible instruments of freedom. Eliza's memorable journey over the icy river, for instance, transforms nature into a dynamic force of defiance, showcasing that even within systems of extreme oppression, the oppressed can find a measure of agency and control. Geographical realism, the process of precisely portraying locations and places or depending the action of events on real geography, becomes part of the story with the narrator mapping the territory to show how Eliza is going to escape. This use of space can also be described as strategic. According to Marie-Laure Ryan et al., the type of textual environment that enhances the spontaneous creation of maps is what we refer to as strategic space (45). This is because maps are uniquely suited to visually represent how physical geography, such as terrain, distance, obstacles, and spatial relationships, interacts with the characters' plans and movements (47). In such spaces, where achieving a goal depends heavily on navigating or mastering the environment, textual descriptions alone might not be clear enough. In contrast, a map can quickly clarify logistical challenges and tactical opportunities, making it an interpretive tool for both readers and creators (Ryan et al. 62).

The created map of Eliza's journey clearly depicts the physical setting through which the story attempts to emphasize that her survival relies not just on her bravery but also on the strategic use of landscape. This kind of spatial setting, which is referred to by Marie-Laure Ryan et al. as "strategic space," portrays how characters must defeat physical barriers, distances, and paths—circumstances that textual description alone might not adequately

convey—in order to escape slavery and gain freedom. The map I have created enhances the understanding of space in the novel by transforming Eliza's journey into a spatial story and showing her path from the slaveholder's house across forested country, dangerous locations, and finally reaching the ice river that symbolizes both threat and opportunity. The jagged edges of the ice reflect the uncertainty, while the dazzling glow on the horizon, which the river flows toward, implies that the promise of freedom is interconnected with danger. The obstacles mentioned in the narrative are represented by each illustrated waypoint, such as footprints, cabins, fences, swirling snow, and distributed hunters. The dotted path that traces her movement makes her strategic problem solving visible, illustrating that her actions are not random panic but rather intentional navigation shaped by the boundaries of the land. Moreover, the upper side of the map marks regions of "danger," while the opposite side points to the direction of "Canaan," the symbolic space of freedom. This visually establishes the logic of strategic space, where every choice is based on the environment and how it can contribute to the final goal. The setting takes part in her struggle instead of just framing it. The portrayal of Eliza mid-stride on the ice, her silhouette leaning forward as if driven by the terrain, dramatizes her agency without romanticizing it, showing her cooperation with the very environment that constitutes a threat to her. Additionally, the map depicts her departure as a journey from darkness to light, with the rising sun signifying freedom and underscoring the notion that natural space turns into a contradictory force, a barrier, and a lifeline. As "[r]eaders[,] … we can … walk, drive, or otherwise move about in space to enjoy the underlying stor[y]," as Ryan et al. would argue (163). In this way, the image serves as both a spatial argument and a complement, supporting the idea that freedom in the narrative is achieved through both geography and bravery, and illustrating how landscapes turn into tools of human will.

All things considered, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the house, the river, the Southern landscape all have different but related functions. The transformation of landscapes into "maps" urges us to follow a "path" which reveals the impact of slavery in physical terms on the reformation of identity and the sense of belonging. Harriet Beecher Stowe through her timeless anti-slavery novel encourages people to view critically the racial hierarchies and the lack of humanism that characterize the American antebellum society. Her characters and the portrayal of space provide us with a deeper understanding of how identities, ideologies, and class distinctions were affected by slavery.

Works cited

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